

**e-VOTE
AN EXPERIMENT IN E-DEMOCRACY FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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www.evot.eu2003.gr

Abstract

The Internet has become a metaphor for participatory democracy as it promises the democratisation of the political process by opening up radical possibilities for enhancing citizens' participation, increasing access to information, fostering dialogue between actors involved in decision making, and opening up channels of communications between citizens and their elected representatives. This article introduces and reviews an innovative experiment situated at the heart of these promises: e-Vote. E-vote was launched during Greece's six-month Presidency of the European Union (January-June 2003). It constituted an ambitious experiment to bring e-democracy to the European Union and was designed to probe the potential of the Internet for enhancing citizen participation in European Union decision- and policy-making processes. The experiment was greeted with enthusiasm by Internet users, particularly at times of political crisis. The article draws on the success of e-Vote to argue for the introduction of further initiatives to develop electronic democracy, such as the creation of a virtual demos at the European level. The experience of e-Vote shows that mediated spaces developed to nurture democratic dialogue can fundamentally renew citizens' participation in the European political process and, most importantly, that such fora are definitely in demand by citizens.

Introduction

During its six-month Presidency of the European Union (January-June 2003), Greece launched e-Vote, an ambitious experiment to bring e-democracy to the European Union. The e-Vote experiment is situated within a broader commitment by the Greek government to open up citizen participation in the political process by using the opportunities provided by new communications technologies. This commitment pays tribute to the legacy of ancient Athenian democracy, as it aims to contribute to the creation of a virtual demos for political debate and interaction.

The Internet and Democracy

The politics that generated the enthusiasm behind the e-vote experiment came from a popular approach to the Internet. This approach, which is the basis for many e-government related experiments worldwide, can be described as the 'e-gov' approach to the Internet. According to this approach,

the Internet is a mass communications medium that can bring the radical democratisation of society and politics, since it empowers people worldwide by increasing their access to producing and using information, to engaging and expressing opinion. Internet technology creates a virtual space where individuals across cultures and social characteristics can freely express their opinions and debate their views directly and independently. This is because the Internet increases access and choice for individuals. It increases the control that the “little guy”, the average person, has over larger structures. This increase in access and choice is an increase in the quantity and in the quality of access and choice. There are literally just more people from more countries and more texts around on-line. At the same time, on-line communications are more direct and give the user a great ability to manipulate information. This means the communication between the provider and the user can be tailor-made to meet the exact interests and needs of both parties. This is ideal for democracy.

In other words, by extending access in the above ways the Internet allows the two parties in any exchange to be more equal; it brings them closer together. Being interactive, Internet technology also allows for the two parties to interact and negotiate with greater detail than ever before. The exchange between two parties becomes infinitely more reciprocal, since the Internet delegates power to the weaker side of the exchange.

In the context of governance, the advent of the Internet promises to ‘purify’ the political process. Today, at a time when citizens worldwide seem increasingly detached from or disenchanted by traditional politics, the Internet opens radical new possibilities to reinvigorate and enrich democratic dialogue. To begin with, it promises equality in the communication process which means more power to citizens in their exchanges with their representatives. It also promises to automatically open up the political process, since a healthy democracy resides in healthier communications between all the parties involved. Above all, it opens up the channels of participation to more people and also strengthens the channels of interaction between decision-makers and citizens. The hope of all e-government initiatives is that the Internet can empower those in the margins by giving them access to more information and radically increasing their chance to participate in the democratic process. Furthermore, given that the Internet opens up new channels for interaction between governments, the state and citizens, it makes both the political and financial workings of the state more transparent, accountable and inclusive.

A Legacy in Participatory Democracy

The paradigm for democracy evoked by the Internet mirrors that of participatory democracy invented and practiced in Athens some 2,500 years ago. In the public meeting places of ancient Athens, such as the Pnyx or Agora, people could freely express their concerns before their leaders and fellow citizens. As long as they shouted loud enough and had something valuable to contribute to the debate, their voice would be heard. The Internet allows for such space to be re-invented to serve the needs and challenges of

an increasingly globalised polity. Greece is committed to developing new democratic practices that promote participation on a European level. The ultimate objective is to implement innovative forms of deliberative democracy that emphasise the role deliberation, debate and regular engagement in public discourse have in ensuring the development of social values and effective democratic institutions.

The e-Vote Initiative

The e-Vote initiative was designed to probe the potential of the Internet for enhancing citizen participation in European Union decision- and policy-making processes. It did not set out to merely survey public opinion but to involve citizens, mirroring the organisers' belief that democracy is in fact a reciprocal process. E-vote was an interactive online forum using the latest technology, which aimed to:

- i) Offer citizens new ways to participate in key policy debates currently taking place in the European Union, thus strengthening their voice in the public policy process;
- ii) Encourage a sense of European citizenship by enabling people to share and compare their views on common policies and problems that affect their daily lives and their collective future; and
- iii) Bridge the gap between European citizens and their elected representatives.

The initiative was anchored around a website that received unprecedented traffic. The e-Vote website at www.evot.eu2003.gr made a dual contribution: it offered informative content on current European issues and the opportunity to participate in and voice opinion on policy decisions related to these issues. It did so through a clear visual language and information architecture designed to be accessible to all users, irrespective of their familiarity with the medium. In order to accommodate cultural diversity, the e-Votes and the content were available in all eleven official languages of the European Union, as well as of the ten future member states. The site's architecture provided one click-through access to information on EU basics and to background information to topical issues, so that citizens could be informed whilst expressing their opinion. The privacy of users was guaranteed throughout the e-Vote experience.

Through e-Vote, citizens were invited to respond to multiple choice questions on topical issues such as enlargement, immigration, the environment, and the European Union's role in the world - issues that reflect the political and social priorities of the Greek Presidency's agenda. All the results were public and available in real time. (A report on the main findings of the e-Vote is available online¹.) In addition, e-vote offered users the opportunity to voice their opinion

¹ See <http://evot.eu2003.gr/evote/en/conclusions/index.stm>

in a free fashion by sending comments and suggestions to European leaders through the e-Voice feature, a service offered through an automated feedback form. Of the 60,000 e-Voices submitted, the seven most frequently asked questions were selected via word-usage ranking. Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Moller, Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel, and Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreou responded directly to these questions online.

The Greek Presidency contributed further to the e-vote process by sharing the results with top-level decision-makers. Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreou regularly reported on the key findings to the Council of Ministers, so that people's views fed directly into ongoing policy debates. Rather than simply being told what Ministerial councils were discussing, the public was empowered to engage in these discussions. Moreover, the Presidency did not shy away from asking controversial and even politically sensitive questions, not usually voiced through 'traditional' channels of communication with government bodies and official institutions. Both these facts contributed significantly to the project's success.

Online surveys of public opinion may not be as scientifically accurate as traditional polling, but they have the additional benefit of educating participants, by raising complex questions that elicit studied responses. e-Vote did not aspire to capture a snapshot of a passive public opinion, but was seen as an opportunity to engage the public (if indirectly) in ongoing political debates with their representatives. That is why e-Vote respondents were not simply invited to respond to fixed questions, but were invited to formulate their own comments and exchange their own ideas. Democracy is not simply a procedure to aggregate individual wants or values, but a process whereby individuals - through interaction - *form* their social and individual values. The focus on *forming* views and opinions, as opposed to simply *registering* opinions, was key to the e-Vote experiment. Eventually, one would hope that citizens will be involved in formulating the questions themselves, and devising ways to prioritise and tackle issues, rather than simply 'passively' signing a petition or taking to the streets to protest policies that they feel do not represent their interests.

e-Vote was endorsed by an extensive network of international media and non-governmental organisations, which created links to their own websites encouraging users to participate. This proves that this type of initiative is also a useful tool for building bridges and partnerships between governments/institutions and non-governmental interest groups and activists.

A Successful Experiment

E-Vote proved to be the most popular European e-democracy project to date, with over 177,000 respondents from across Europe and around the world. By far the most popular e-Vote, with over 105,000 participants, was on the Iraq crisis – an issue where public opinion and political leadership were deeply divided in many European countries. This capacity to react to breaking news and provide a platform for peaceful civil protest demonstrates the value of this

kind of 'electronic demos' as a flexible and advanced tool for engaging citizens in critical issues of topical and global relevance.

By actively soliciting public opinion, e-Vote was an important step towards bridging the gap between European leaders and their constituents, institutions and citizens, nations and regions. Of course, e-Vote is not a scientific analysis of public opinion: those who participated were self-selected and not everyone has access to a computer. While Internet access in existing European Union member states is relatively high², it is also very uneven, and the level of Internet use in the future member states is considerably lower.

Like 'real' democracy, the success of e-democracy depends on maximum public participation. E-democracy will only really work if access to the Internet is available to all. This initiative highlights the importance of tackling the digital divide, through existing and enhanced European Union policy directives. And like regular democracy, it depends on information and communication campaigns to raise awareness and drive participation. On the other hand, the Internet is growing faster than any other means of communication and, in time, could become a vital part of the democratic process. The high levels and wide geographical scope of participation in e-Vote, compared to similar exercises both in Europe and beyond, attests to the usefulness of such a channel of communication and interaction.

An Electronic Demos for Europe

Establishing an electronic demos at the European Union, or even United Nations level would strengthen civil participation and enhance global democratic legitimacy and transparency. The Greek Foreign Ministry is currently exploring a variety of applications for the complex technical system created for the e-Vote – from a tool for conflict resolution, to a discussion forum on the draft European Constitution. If people feel that they have a direct stake in the issues, they will actively seek to voice their views, as well as having a real sense of how their voice impacts decisions about issues that concern us all. Indeed, over 70% of participants characterised the development of "a forum like this e-Vote at the European Union level, using Internet and telephone voting, where citizens can frequently register their opinions on important issues" as a "really very good idea". About 70% of respondents said they would make frequent use of such a forum in the future.

e-Democracy should be viewed as a complement to - not a substitute for - traditional forms of political participation. As evidenced by the low voting turn-outs in elections, citizens worldwide are losing interest in traditional political channels and are sceptical about political leadership. In a sense, this underpins the weaknesses of traditional voting as the all-encompassing, single legitimate means of democratic expression. Traditional voting "is a way of temporarily calling a halt to deliberations under pressing needs for action."

² According to the latest eEurope 2002 Report, over 90% of schools and businesses are online, more than 50% of EU citizens are regular Internet users and 43% of European Union households are connected to the Internet.

What is critical is the very process of “inter-subjective deliberation about ends and responsiveness to public reasons that are ideally a part of democratic self-rule” (Christopher F. Zurn, *Deliberative Democracy and Constitutional Review*, 2002).

There may be no such thing as ‘pure’ or ‘perfect’ democracy. But there is always room to explore new ways of invigorating and improving it. The power of e-democracy is its capacity to increase interaction between ordinary citizens and decision-making bodies, and to harness the positive aspects of globalisation. New technology allows people to mobilise around common causes and build trans-national networks across regions, religions, and races, thus strengthening civil society, an essential pre-requisite of effective democratic governance. The e-Vote should be seen within the framework of the broader objective of making deliberative democracy – the active engagement of people in the shaping of their lives – the guiding principle of our Information Society.